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ABSTRACT

Proposed and actual constitutional changes made in 1963 and 1965 concerning the status of English in India are discussed in the light of nation-wide sociological implications. The author examines the position of Hindi and English as the official languages of the nation and comments on the continuing importance of English as the language of employment in both the official and private sectors. Theoretical aspects of English instruction are reviewed and the predominant position of reading and writing skills in the curriculum is underscored. (RL)

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Teaching English in India

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The study of English language and literature is more of a legacy of the British rule in India, than the conscious choice of the policy makers in the country. While sentiments swayed demanding " send the English language back with the Englishmen," English had to be incorporated into the Indian Constitution as one of the Official Languages of the country. There was no choice in this case, for Hindi was not yet considered developed enough to be the language of the Administration. Besides, English had dug quite deep in the minds of many Indians, people had come to learn and imbibe certain ways of the British life. The unconscious influence of association with the British ways of life and conscious prestige motif involved in knowing English were too strong to be ignored at that time, and to a great extent even to this day. Nost of the administrative work, Education, Health Services, Judicial Work, and other important services of the Administration were conducted through the medium of English.
A provision was laid down in the Constitution to the effect that Hindi shall become the Official language of the country by 1965 with a corresponding decreasing use of English in the affairs of the Administration of the central government.
All was not well with the Constitution makers for they had added a clause which assured of the continuance of English even after 1965 if the Parliament so desired. This clause was invoked in 1963 and English was accorded the status of the Official language along

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with Hindi. A multilingual country like India witnessed rivalries over the dominating role of one regional language over others, and gave a significant position to English simply because of its neutral position in linguistic rivalry. Moreover, English continues to be the language of the employment not only in the official sector, also in the private sector. English thus continued to dominate in all walks of life, and it is likely to be in that position for another 20 years or so. Most teachers learnt it as a first language with added emphasis on reading and writing. The pre-independence education was mainly manned by British educators or Indian teachers working under the policies laid down by the British. There was no thought given to the aspect of English as a second language in the country. Heavy load of home work was one of the most important jobs of a teacher of English both in the school and in the college. Any training in the skill of reading was considered to be secondary, and for most of the time was left to the students themselves. Speech was nowhere in the scheme of priorities in the teaching. Students learnt to speak mainly by imitating their teachers or the spelling oriented speech. Most Indians, except for those who were educated in convent schools or those who maintained contacts with the Englishmen, were thus helping the growth of what is now called the Indian English. The notion that a good student must be able to write in a flowery language, a clerk must be able to prepare statements or drafts or summaries in convincing yet extrahumble language, placed heavy emphasis on memoriation of chunks of written English from guide books or study-aid series, which appeared in the market long

before the text book itself. The students passed or failed more or less on the study-aid series, going to classes was becoming more of a formality in most cases.

Teaching oriented to the writing skill meant the neglect of other important skills of learning. Speech and reading habits were not developed to the extent that most educators had to come out with the justification that the two skills were not that important in the Indian context. The question of reference to difficulties created by a bilingual situation or that of a contrastive analysis of the first and the second language (English) did not arise. The language teachers viewed English as the first language. The logic ran like this: If a student could read and write in Hindi, what was so difficult that he would not learn the same skills in the same manner in English.

This situation continued for more than 10 years with standards in second language teaching sharply declining. Most committees and Commissions wasted ink to bemoan the state of second language teaching but not much was done. The change occurred with the establishment of the Central Institute of English in Hyderabad, the first official realization of the need of developing English as a Second Language teaching program. This was also forced by the increasing importance of the regional languages in the administration. Once the regional language was on its way to be the language of employment, English assumed secondary importance in the scheme of things.

The importance of teaching English in the country was stressed in

many academic forums, rationally enough, on the basis of its role in science and technology and as a world language. Two important Commissions, headed by eminent educationists, stressed the role of English in this light. The University Education Commission, headed by Dr. Radhakirishnan, former President of India and a great academician in his own right, gave the following rationale:

> English, however, must continue to be studied. It is a language which is rich in literature - humanistic, scientific, and technical. If under sentimental urges we should give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of our growing language. Unable to have access to this knowledge, our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movements of thought would become negligible. Its effects would be disastrous for our practical life, for living nations must move with the times and must respond quickly to the challenge of the surroundings. English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world, and we will act unwisely if we allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance. Our students who are undergoing training at schools, which will admit them either to the university or to a vocation must acquire sufficient mastery of English to give them access to the treasures of knowledge and in the universities no student should be allowed to take a degree who does not acquire the <u>ability to read with facility and understanding</u> works of English authors. We must take into account our <u>Yugadharma</u> a sense of oneness of the world is in the making and control over a medium of expression which is more widespread and has a larger reach than any of our languages today will be of immense benefit to us.
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> 1949

It is significant to note that this Commission stresses <u>the ability to read with facility and understanding</u> as minimum of competence level for an average student. The intelligent student will take on a more creative role, writing in English. The average student was thus to develop competence in reading and writing, a cosmopolitan outlook through the study of English, and transcending the narrow linguistic feelings. The Indian Education Commission headed by Dr. D.S. Kothari, Chairman of the University Grants Commission, was more down to earth in his approach, reasonably enough for it was doing its work in 1964-66,

a period when language controversy was at its worst. The commission suggested a more practical approach, though echoing much of the earlier Commission's sentiments:

> For successful completion of the first degree course, a student should possess an adequate command over English, be able to express himself in it with reasonable ease and facility, understand lectures in it and avail himself of its literature. Therefore, adequate emphasis will have to be laid on its study as a language right from the school stage, English should be the most useful 'library language' in higher education and our most significant window on the world.

The emphasis in this report is on all the four skills-speaking, understanding, reading, and writing. The ability to express himself includes speech and writing. The ability to understand lectures refers to listening ability while making use of literature refers to the development of critical reading skills. This sounds more or less like textbook caveats in foreign language teaching, moreso when one contrasts this with the actual situation in the classrooms. Teachers continue to lecture while students continue to take recourse to the study-aid series. Tutorial classes which were originally meant to provide individual attent to the student were soon converted into lecture classes, partly due to the size of such groups, and partly due to the absence of any clear program for such meetings. This is not intended to suggest that the teaching of English is in a very bad state in the country, gradual changes are being introduced at some places. Speech training has been left out of the scope of the present paper with the assumption that the school education has given adequate training in this respect. Speech clubs can be run as a co-curricular activity in schools and colleges. This is of fundamental importance for both reading and writing involve vocalization and subvocalization,

and also better speech leads to better understanding and vice-versa. As the student is expected to make use of English language skills in his other academic interests either in the Humanities or in the Sciences, the acquisition of reading and writing skills helps him a great deal in his work. The main objective of the undergraduate program in English in India are the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The reading skills comprise of perceiving the important points made in the material, analysis of these points, making comparisons with the ones suggested by the teacher or from the students earlier readings, and forming a comprehensive view of the whole subject. The student should be able to develop and expand his reading interests as a result of his success in making use of English as a library language. The program in writing skills consists of activities which enable the student to write letters, short statements, and longer compositions on various subjects that interest him in his social and professional life. The obvious emphasis in this case is on economy, clarity, and pointedness of expression, rather than ornamental use of the language. The immediate skills that a student should be able to acquire through such a program are: making an application for tuition waiver, grant of books, or such other purpose in the college; application for job; letter to the Editor; letter to some local authority for civic welfare; letter to friends and relations. The ultimate intention of the program, of course, is to enable the student to communicate with a native speaker of the language. This, however, is an ideal which may not be achieved within the limits of the program. This would possibly be applicable to any country where

English is used as a second language.

A program of instruction aimed at fulfilling the above objectives needs to be based on a study of the entry behavior or the students' language competence before they join college, which will give a fair idea of the starting point for the program. The students' competence level will determine the sequencing of instructional units and continuous evaluation of the program. The entry behavior may be measured either by Diagnostic Tests or by personal meetings between teachers and students. While the former suggestion requires the developemnt of standardized tests, the second is easy to manage, though little irregular in nature. On a four-point skill scale, teachers should evaluate students at the beginning of the program. This evaluation should be the basis for the composition of the tutorial program in the college. Once the entry behavior of the students has been evaluated and its results tabulated and interpreted, instructional sequences can be effectively determined for groups of students. There is a great need for experimenting with a major departure at this state. Teaching is mainly organized in terms of genres of literature - one teacher teaches poetry, another teaches prose, yet another teaches drama, and so on. This is the practice prevalent in most colleges in the country. Teaching poetry and drama (more so, in case of Shakespeare) is a matter of prestige in the country: most universities include writers motivated by the prestige factor of the curriculum in the eyes of the public. Students and teachers struggle with the niceties or depravities in the character, moral of the story or the poem, romantic concept in a poem, or such other factors in literary appreciation. Language skills become incidental in such teaching. One can imagine the plight of students who have not been equipped with basic language skills and are expected to write literary appreciation

of certain genres of writing.

It is in the light of this consideration that a major departure is suggested here. Most classes should be skill-based; a class in reading skills and a class in writing skills. These should be the two main divisions of the undergraduate program and teaching materials should be prepared on such considerations. Much of literature can still be included in the program, the change in emphasis, however, will be the major factor.

In reading from a text book or some reference book, the main aim of the student is to get information from the printed page efficiently and rapidly. This does not mean mere decoding from the printed page, but an active subvocalization association of the printed work with the sounds and meanings in the particular context. Such reading skills would mean reading speed, vocabulary recognition comprehension of sentences and paragraphs, and comprehension of complete reading selections. There is a great need for considering training in associating the printed word with the spoken form, before seeking to establish a direct contact between thegraphemes and their meanings. This is very important in language acquisition both with the native and non-native speakers of English. An interview conducted with ten graduate students majoring in various subjects pointed to the importance of vocalization or subvocalization while reading. Eight students agreed that this practice helped them to better comprehension of the given text, the two felt that it had become a habit with them.

Speed of recognition and comprehension involves word recognition speed which can be brought about by improving eye movements and visual discrimination aimed at symbol-meaning-sound association.

This can be done by card loops or tachistoscopic machines. In fact, the whole set of activities in the reading program can be based on various audio-visual devices used in most reading programs or teacher-based activities. Time factor is very important in a developing country which aims at getting the maximum with a minimum of spending. Most courses of reading can be cut short with this kind of skill-orientation. Reading with a purpose and success in a short period will lead to more concerted attempts on the part of the students and will prove more rewarding to dedicated teachers. A short term program with a time-scheduled activity is more meaningful to both students and teachers. Teachers need to be trained in what Donna H. Carr calls intelligent questioning.

> How did the author choose to arrange his ideas? Is time important here? If so, list the times he refers to. Did the author begin with a generalization? If so, what kind of evidence has he used to support it? How is this evidence arranged? Where is the generalization physically placed? Where is the evidence physically placed? What words lead the reader from one idea to another, from one paragraph to the next one? Why must paragraph three come before paragraph four? And so on.
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Such questions help the teacher to plan a series of questions based on the needs of a specific text, thus leaving much to teacher's imagination. Being specific in nature, such questions lead to quick responses and provide the teacher with an immense sense of satisfaction. The students gradually learn what to look for in a reading selection. The teacher can then add to the skills acquired by helping them to find points of association or comparison with their previous readings or views.

Most teachers have taught sentence structure in the name of teaching writing to the undergraduate students. There has been enough evidence to suggest that students master most structures quite easily with continued drilling. However, the difficulty arises when the students attempt to write a coherent paragraph, an application, or a letter. This involves matching the complexities of the thought processes with the complexities of the language structure. Most students' assignments provide a clue to the processes in operation at the time of writing. It is as if various structures are stored in different circuits of the brain, and arrangement of the various structures in a coherent paragraph goes wrong. The ability to draw correctly from the various circuits is mostly found wanting in the students. This points to one important aspect of language teaching: that teaching writing should not stop at sentence structure drilling, paragraph writing should be the goal.

The emphasis thus should be ultimately on the students' ability to generate language in free composition. However, a beginning is to be made with sentence pattern itself. The act of building on to the point of free composition is to begin at this level.

The other method - paragraph writing from the beginning - can be equally effective. The students are asked to write a passage or two on some subject of common interest, leading to an evaluation of his pluses and minuses in terms of the writing skill.

Individual student's language ability graphs can be drawn for referring to the student's performance over a period of time. Any slow increase or hiatus in learning should be solved by a conference between the various teachers teaching the course and by a conference with the student concerned. The teaching of

writing by paragraph also assumes that remedial teaching goes side by side with the other teaching. The student learns to avoid errors with each new attempt. This approach has an additional advantage insofar as it capitalizes on the students previous knowledge and adds new structures to his limits of productive control. An analysis of such free writing can also give substantial body of data for preparing a program in remedial English.

The program in teaching writing skill, so planned, will operate at three levels: teaching sentence structure through pattern practice, guided composition, and free composition with remedial English. Sentence structure comes first while the teaching of guided and free composition could be started at a relatively later period. However, in classes where the assumption that the students have acquired sufficient control over the structures at the school level can work, the program should begin with guided composition and free composition. This could be established by a test on the various structures and transformations at the beginning of the instructional program.

The suggestions made in this paper can be further integrated to give a one-unit program in the teaching of English language skills. As both reading and writing are concerned with ideas and their relationships, such an integration could be more purposeful to the students. Similarities between the reading and writing processes should be exploited in the classroom. A composition exercise could begin with or be based on a reading that serves as a model. First the student attempts to analyze the organizational pattern of the reading material, he follows it up by writing those ideas

in his own words.

This is not the end product of teaching English language skills in India. A lot of research needs to go into the time factor for the instructional program, grouping of students on the basis of their language abilities, teacher training toward a skill-oriented teaching of language, preparation of teaching materials, and other aspects of the problem. There are signs of hope as the teaching of English as a Second Language is becoming an important concern of most Departments of English in the country. The expertise made available by agencies like the Ford Foundation, the British Council, and the Central and regional institutes of English in the country has generated abundant activity in this field.